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NAVAL PROSPECTS IN 1917

BY

ARCHIBALD HURD.

LONDON:
EYRE AND SPOTTISWOODE, LIMITED,
1917.

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CONFUCIUS recommends us to "study the past if you would divine the future," and we may judge the naval prospects of the year 1917 from the events which have occurred at sea since the outbreak of hostilities in August, 1914.

When the war opened, the Central Powers believed themselves fully prepared at sea. Germany possessed a navy larger than the combined forces of France and Russia, gaining all the advantages which are always associated with unity of design, training, and command. If the British people, whose interest in the Continental quarrel was moral rather than material, had determined to stand aside, leaving Serbia to be crushed, Belgium to be overrun, and France and Russia to be defeated, the Central Powers would have

obtained the assured command of the world's seas.

The German naval preparations, pursued unremittedly over a period of nearly twenty years, were undertaken at a cost of about 300,000,000 pounds in order to frighten the British people into adopting an attitude of neutrality. In the preamble to the German Navy Act of 1900, it was candidly declared that "Germany must have a battle-fleet so strong that, even for the adversary with the greatest sea-power, a war against it would involve such dangers as to imperil his position in the world." In other words, dependent as no nation before has been dependent on sea-communications, the British people were to be prevented by the threat of a great German fleet from taking part in any war in which Germany became involved. When at last the war-party in Germany gained the ascendancy for which they had been struggling, the German Fleet had reached a strength which rendered it a menace to the sea-interests of the British Empire,

Nevertheless, the British people throughout the world—the Dominions anticipating the decision of the Mother Country,*—determined to join in the war, prompted thereto by sympathy with Serbia and afterwards by horror at the wrong done to Belgium. German naval policy failed; the British Fleet was instantly mobilised when the war opened on the Continent, and thus gained the initiative at sea which, during nearly

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* The significance of the verdict of the British Dominions on the issue in Europe, which was reached before the British Cabinet in London had decided to fight, has not been fully realised. Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, like British India, had no direct interest in the European struggle, and yet the people of the Dominions, like the ruling Princes of India, determined to bear their share in the war. The action of these far distant parts of the British Empire is the most complete answer to the taunt that Britain entered the war because she was jealous of German progress. Germany, if German influence had been politically and morally beneficial, had nothing to fear from these widely distributed peoples, far removed from the scene of the war.

two and a half years of war, it has never lost.

Do not underestimate the significance of that initial, though silent, victory. At the moment when war occurred, Germany possessed the largest fleet but one in the world, and she gained all the advantages flowing from a strategical situation which enabled her to prevent co-operation between the British and Russian fleets, while at the same time she possessed North Sea ports within three or four hundred miles of the exposed and, so far as shore guns are concerned, undefended eastern littoral of Great Britain. She was able to mobilise 40 capital ships—battleships and battle-cruisers—besides 8 older coast defence battleships ; she also possessed 9 armoured and 43 other cruisers, as well as nearly 200 destroyers and torpedo boats, and about 30 submarines. Germany had a great fleet, well manned, well equipped, and well trained. She could count on the support of the considerable naval forces of Austria-Hungary in southern waters. Her Ally

possessed 7 modern and 8 older battleships, besides 20 cruisers and over 100 torpedo craft. If it was a source of weakness that the two Allied fleets were so far apart, it was a source of strength that Germany was able to count on her partner maintaining a naval threat in southern waters, and thus checking any tendency on the part of the Entente Powers to carry out a complete policy of concentration by sea against her.

What course has the naval war taken? A review of the past may enable us to form some conception of what the future has in store. The Austro-Hungarian Navy has been compelled to adopt a policy of almost uninterrupted inactivity. It has inflicted, and has itself suffered, incidental losses, but it has made no attempt to upset the balance of power in the Mediterranean, contenting itself with not very successful submarine attacks on the Allies' maritime lines of communication. The German Fleet has shown more initiative. It has made some effort to convince the world that it is not, in a

military sense, "contained." In the first phase of the naval war, a section of the British Fleet, under Admiral Sir David Beatty, invaded the Bight of Heligoland and inflicted on the Germans considerable losses. That action led the Germans to take precautions against its repetition, with the result that, though British submarines have been continually on duty in what may be regarded as Germany's own waters, they have enjoyed infrequent opportunities of attack owing to the absence of targets. At last the Germans decided on adopting the offensive with their battle-cruisers. These large swift vessels, protected by a screen of destroyers while emerging from Germany's submarine infested waters, on successive occasions dashed in the darkness across to the English coast, and, contrary to international law, bombarded a number of seaside resorts devoid of all form of defence. Since January, 1915, that policy has been abandoned. Why? The explanation is to be found in Sir David Beatty's successful action off the Dogger

Bank, when the *Blücher* was sunk and two other battle-cruisers narrowly escaped destruction. That form of raid was found too costly.

Changes were afterwards made in the German naval staff and in the command of the High Seas Fleet, and, after long preparation, a new policy was adopted. On May 31st last the whole of the German naval force advanced into the North Sea, with the intention of defeating the British battle-cruiser force under Sir David Beatty before Admiral Sir John Jellicoe could arrive on the scene of action with his slower battleships. That scheme also failed. Admiral Beatty outmanœuvred the Germans, eventually drawing them on to Sir John Jellicoe's force, with the result that Admiral von Scheer took advantage of the failing light to escape back to his home ports, having lost no inconsiderable number of his ships and suffered great injury in those which remained afloat. The Germans claimed that they had won a victory. Time tests every war claim. Naval battles

are fought with only one object—in order to gain the right to use the seas for military and economic purposes. Since the Battle of Jutland, German naval activity has been confined to destroyer raids in the darkness, which have achieved no military results, and to the submarine campaign against the merchant shipping of the Allies, and, unfortunately, also of neutrals.

The submarine campaign is doomed to failure. No offensive weapon has ever yet been developed which was not eventually met by an adequate defensive. The Germans are at present obtaining the benefit of what may be described as a new form of naval warfare, for the submarine as a practical sea-going weapon has been developed since hostilities opened. There is no reason to doubt that in due course the submarine will be defeated. When that result has been produced, what will happen? Will the High Seas Fleet again emerge from behind its minefields, leaving the support of heavy coast artillery? Count Reventlow and other

German writers in close touch with the Higher Command have, time and again, asserted that the German naval forces will never engage at sea unless there is an assurance that they will be opposed by approximately equal strength. The British Fleet is stronger, absolutely and relatively, than it ever was. Making allowance for its superior gun-power, it is more than twice as strong in modern battleships and battle-cruisers as Germany, and it is adequately supplied with light cruisers and destroyers. The Germans may attempt to trick the British admirals, as in the past, but they will fail as they failed before. Unless Germany, therefore, determines in desperation to stake her all on a battle at sea, hoping, though defeat be certain, to take to the bottom of the sea at least an equivalent number of British units, there is no reason to anticipate that this year any serious effort will be made to break the iron dominion which the British Fleet is imposing on the German Empire. Austria-Hungary is also unable to use her naval forces.

With every month that passes the Allies' command of the sea will be reinforced by new units and by the strength which comes from sea-keeping. What those factors in combination involve it is hardly necessary to explain. During the months ahead, sea-power will be translated into land-power. In the early phase of the war it brought to ruin Germany's military policy—a short sharp campaign against France to be followed by the defeat of Russia. It will bring to ruin the later military scheme which has involved in the war Bulgaria and Turkey. All those Powers which are now associated with Germany will continue to be besieged by sea, and all history attests that the sea controls the land. As the greatest writer on naval history, Admiral Mahan, remarked in reviewing the course of events after the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 :—" Amid all the pomp and circumstance of the war which for ten years to come desolated the Continent, amid all the tramping to and fro over Europe of the French Armies and their auxiliary

(37)2017

legions, there went on unceasingly that noiseless pressure upon the vitals of France, that compulsion, whose silence, when once noted, becomes to the observer the most striking and awful mark of the working of sea-power." Throughout 1917 sea-power will continue to be arrayed against Germany and her partners, and in due course it will bring them to defeat and ruin.

ARCHIBALD HURD.

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